

Fallout From Watergate

By Jane Runyon

When an official in the United States government is accused of doing something wrong, it is called impeachment. Impeachment hearings are held in front of Congress. If the charges are proved, the official can be removed from office. Up until 1974, only one president had faced impeachment. His name was Andrew Johnson. He became president after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. The charges against Johnson could not be proved, so Johnson remained in office.

The investigation into the Watergate break-in continued to turn up the involvement of more and more people in the Nixon White House. More people began to talk of impeachment proceedings against the president. Could it be proved that the president had knowledge of plans for illegal acts against the Democratic Party? Had he helped make the plans? If this was true, he could be removed from office.



Seven of Nixon's former aides were indicted by the court in March of 1974. That means that they were ordered to appear in court to answer charges against them. Most of them were charged with lying or withholding evidence from the investigators. In August of that year, the most incriminating White House tape of all was found. It was called by many the "smoking gun." This tape proved that Nixon knew what was going on. He supported the plans. Investigators heard for themselves the president and his aide, Bob Haldeman, discussing plans to keep investigators from finding out the truth.

Nixon could see the end coming. He did not wish to face impeachment proceedings. On August 8, 1974, he appeared on national television. He still proclaimed his innocence. But he said he wanted to save the country from any more investigations or hearings. He announced his resignation from the presidency of the United States. It would become effective at noon the very next day. By doing this, Richard Nixon became the first President of the United States to resign. Television cameras recorded the events the next day as Nixon and his wife, Pat, walked out of the White House and onto a presidential helicopter. They flew from the lawn of the White House into political history. Vice President Gerald Ford was now President Ford.

Leaving office did not mean that Nixon could not face federal charges. That possibility was erased just one month later. On September 8, 1974, President Ford signed a formal pardon. This pardon stated that although former President Nixon should have acted quicker and more decisively in the Watergate situation, he should not be punished for his part in the action.

Other members of the Nixon administration were not so lucky. John Ehrlichman entered prison in 1976. Robert Haldeman and John Mitchell entered prison the following year. Other members of the administration had to serve jail time for their varying roles in the burglary itself and the cover up.

Following the Watergate scandal, changes were made in how the government was run. A limit was placed on how much money could be donated to political campaigns. Activities among government officials which might in the past have been overlooked were now brought out into the open for all the people to see. One powerful congressman had to resign from office when his arrest for drunken driving was brought to public attention. Before Watergate it might have been ignored. Regulations were written for lawyers as to just how much they could manipulate the law.

The Watergate scandal left a lasting impression on how people viewed the government. Any scandal for years to come had the suffix "-gate" attached to it. President Clinton had to deal with Whitewatergate. The Olympics had its Skatagate. President Nixon went from being a popular president to an icon for bad government. Perhaps the whole situation helped to straighten out a crooked system.

Name _____



Date _____

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Questions

- _____ 1. Andrew Johnson was the first U.S. president to face impeachment.
- A. False
 - B. True

- _____ 2. What piece of evidence sealed President Nixon's fate?
- A. A note
 - B. A picture
 - C. A confession
 - D. An audio tape

3. What does impeachment mean?

4. What did Richard Nixon do that no other President of the United States has done?

- _____ 5. Who became President of the United States after Nixon?
- A. Andrew Johnson
 - B. John F. Kennedy
 - C. Lyndon Johnson
 - D. Gerald Ford

6. Why didn't Nixon have to face the charges brought against him?

- _____ 7. What was the final White House tape called?
- A. The verdict
 - B. The smoking gun
 - C. The final straw
 - D. The indictment

